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CONTENTS

A PROPOSED MODEL FOR TEACHER EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This paper discusses how teacher education programmes in Zimbabwe might be designed to produce a cadre of teacher with the capacity to adapt to the varied and ever-changing teaching contexts of the twenty-first century. In discussing teacher education in Zimbabwe, and to avoid an abstract and general discussion, a concrete model is drawn from English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher education programme. The choice of ESL for purposes of illustration is mainly due to the fact that it is an area the writer has done extensive research in. However, the basic teacher education principles discussed in this paper should apply equally well to any teacher education programme in Zimbabwe which is not necessarily ESL focused.

The main thrust of my argument is that if change in the Zimbabwean classroom is to be effected, it has to start at the teacher preparation stage. Using a conceptual framework in which theoretical and applied linguistics and language learning interact with classroom practice, I argue that teacher education programmes that are based on giving prescriptions to student teachers are not likely to have an impact on the students. Instead, I suggest that teachers be empowered with research and reflective teaching skills in order to become adaptable and autonomous professionals

Why Expert Teachers and the Method Paradigm Cannot be Used as Models of a Teacher Education Programme

Teachers respond differently to the many different contextual factors that impinge on their teaching (Nyawaranda, 1998). This accounts for their unique teaching repertoires. Each teacher's responses to the various contextual factors in his or her teaching are guided by his or her beliefs about his or her subject's instruction. If teaching is basically an individual task, and is always occurring in ever-changing contexts, it is, therefore, necessary that a teacher education programme be informed by these theoretical considerations. This paper is an attempt to describe a teacher education programme that is so informed.

Preparing teachers for a complex and ever-changing teaching and learning world does not call for simplistic solutions, because the issues involved are inevitably complex. The challenge is to educate teachers who are able to adapt to the many ever-changing contexts that daily impinge on their work. In the light of some research findings (for example, Nyawaranda, 1998), and from my personal experiences as a teacher educator in Zimbabwe, I now believe that traditional prescriptions of teaching methods and demonstrations by expert teachers, as is currently the case in Zimbabwe, are not enough to solve the problem of bringing about change for the better in the classroom. The following section of my paper explains why this is so.

The practice of modelling teacher education on expert teachers and the method paradigm is very common among teacher educators in Zimbabwe today. The main techniques used are micro-teaching, often in the form of demonstration lessons; and prescriptive lectures on methodology (cf. Freeman, 1994). Literature on teachers' beliefs (for example Rust, 1994; Nespor, 1987) and Nyawaranda (1998) question the effectiveness of this prevalent approach to teacher preparation.

Nyawaranda (1998) shows that teaching ESL in a contextual environment basically brings out an individualistic response to the various factors impinging on the teacher's work. Centrally, though, these responses are guided by each individual teacher's beliefs. It follows from this, therefore, that it does not make much sense to use a teacher preparation strategy which prescribes "expertise" on teaching to a student-teacher who already has his or her own well-formed beliefs about teaching and learning in his or her unique context. The argument is that no outside prescription will take root in such a teacher, because the assumption that "knowing something in one context will convert into doing it in another" is mistaken (Freeman, 1994, p.1).

Modelling one's teaching on the properties of good teachers reduces the model to the level of techniques, mere memory tricks. Here, the problem is not one of not knowing how to teach, like experts do, but of why the known expertise is not put into practice by those who have acquired it. Teaching a model is another way of prescribing a method of teaching which, as I have already argued, will not lead to the solution of the problem. This is because prescription is based on the mistaken assumption that teaching is uniquely a matter of objective principles about a subject and learning, and that all aspects of good teaching can be taught to a student-teacher or even a practising teacher. On this, I agree with Freeman (1990: 107) who argues:

... such a doctrinaire approach can lead to formulaic teaching and to prescriptive intervention by the educator in everything the student teacher does. Idiosyncratic aspects of the students' teaching are stymied as the relationship becomes a matter of the student replicating the educator's views and practices in the classroom.

Teaching, in its broadest sense includes such large units as material and syllabus preparation, scheming and lesson planning. All these upper levels of the teaching act can be obtained from the textbook, a colleague or an institutional directive. But nothing short of a teacher's unique beliefs about teaching and learning can fill out the lower but crucial levels of the actual utterances in the classroom, such as the initiations, the moves, and the responses to the varying contexts of the classroom. Moreover, these lower level units do determine the relationship of the upper units of teaching (Woods, 1996). The grey area of the lower level units is precisely where prescriptions cease to impact on an individual's focal teaching, because of the uniqueness of the contexts in which these lower level units are played out.

However, some basic principles of good teaching about which people can agree can be found at the high level units of teaching. But, as I have already argued, these high level units of teaching are dependent on the lower units of teaching, that is, at the level of a teacher's personal belief. It is here , at the personal level, that emphasis should be put if we are to influence teachers to change. A combination of the high level and low level units in focal teaching is what makes the conducting of a classroom lesson an act of improvisation (Erickson, 1982). This improvisation applies to both teacher and students, thus making ideal classroom talk a "collective improvisation of meaning and social organization from moment to moment" (Erickson, 1982, p. 153).

From the preceding argument, it is logical to ask how teacher education is possible without some form of prescription from the teacher educator? This may be a wrong question to ask, but it raises what Richards, in Richards and Nunan (1990, p. 1) refers to as "the dilemma of teacher education ..." Here, the hard choice is between the micro approach, what Freeman (1994, p.15) calls "front loading approach to teacher education",

and the macro approach, a holistic examination of the total context of classroom teaching and learning. In other terms, it is a reductionist versus an inquiry model of teacher education. Richards, in Richards and Nunan (1990) argues that observable categories or skills for good teaching are easy to identify, but these do not constitute all there is to teaching. Also involved are high-influence categories that go beyond training, such personal qualities as the teacher's interest in the topic, his or her creativity, judgement and adaptability. This is the area of personal beliefs. These are factors that can also affect how one teaches. Breaking down teacher preparation into atomized, discrete and trainable skills is a *training* rather than *educating* view of teacher preparation. It is merely another version of the method approach. Richards (1990) argues instead for a theory of teaching a subject that would work through the study of the teaching process itself. And, as teaching is intimately related to learning, a theory of how the subject is learned has also to be considered in this process. This is the view I also share, a view that largely motivated the writing of this paper. It is a view based on the assumption that teaching is an individual activity that is driven by one's unique beliefs about teaching and learning.

A study of the teaching process itself would focus on the nature and significance of classroom events. It would involve both low-inference and high-inference categories. It would approach teacher education through a process of clarifying and elucidating the concepts and thinking processes that guide effective teaching of a subject. In short, it would be teacher preparation along the lines of reflective teaching. It would become a process of questioning personal beliefs about teaching and learning. It would be an approach which would aim at making a student teacher an autonomous learner and researcher in addition to being an apprentice (Richards, 1990). A teacher who is an autonomous learner and researcher is one who is constantly finding for himself or herself ways of enhancing the learning of his or her students. This can be done by inquiry into how

students learn, so that the teacher can marry in practice his or her theories of teaching a subject with those of how the subject is learned. Using the actual teaching process approach, the role of the teacher educator goes beyond that of trainer to become the "guide in the process of generating and testing hypotheses and in using the knowledge so acquired as a basis for further development" (Richards, 1990, p.15).

This argument for the macro approach to teacher education would be incomplete without suggesting how it could be implemented in practice. Following is a proposed model for such implementation, using an ESL teacher education programme as an example.

A Proposed Model of ESL Teacher Education Programme

Literature on teacher education shows that what is required in today's changing instructional contexts are teachers with the capacity to combine a model of instruction with an understanding of their particular content area, personal beliefs and insights into student learning. A teacher who is able to survive the many changing teaching environments and teaching fads that have characterized the teaching profession over the last century is one who is prepared to understand and be able to explain the "why" of his or her teaching (Yalden, 1987). This is the kind of teacher who is able "to draw on knowledge and skills in making on line decisions to solve problems that are unique to a particular teaching situation" (Richards et al, 1990, p.2). Such a teacher will have more in common with other professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and architects, in that he or she will not act like a technician who executes skilled performances according to prescriptions or algorithms defined by others. Instead, he or she will be able to understand the growing body of empirical and theoretical knowledge which constitute the literature of teacher research. He or she will be able to combine all this knowledge with his or her own experience

in order to arrive at informed judgements about his or her own teaching (National Institute of Education, 1975).

In an ideal ESL teacher preparation programme, the three components of theoretical linguistics, student learning theories and applied linguistics would all inform or interact with the fourth component, classroom practice, as shown in the following Figure 1. A teacher who is able to draw upon the three knowledge sources of theoretical linguistics, student learning theories and applied linguistics is the teacher who has been exposed to the three areas in such a way that they become part of his or her personal belief system and deeper self. In this paper, the argument is not aimed against the teaching of any of these three areas, but rather at how they should be taught. The four teaching components of theoretical linguistics, student learning theories, applied linguistics and classroom practice, of course, do not occur in a vacuum, but in a social, cultural, political and economic contexts, only to name a few factors. The challenge is, therefore, to prepare a cadre of teachers who are able to respond adequately to each of these contextual factors.

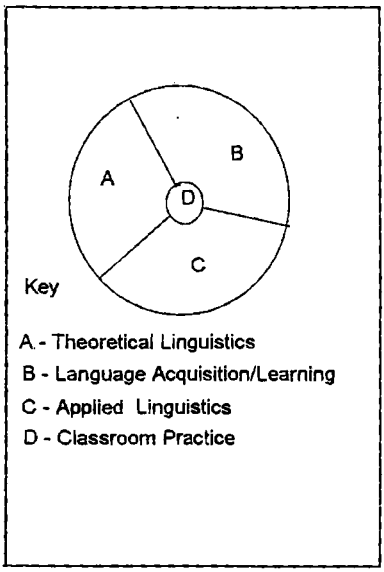

Figure 1: How the four teaching components should interact: A conceptual framework

Traditionally, in Zimbabwe, the ESL teacher education programme has been centred mainly around the areas of teaching methods (also called applied linguistics) and general theories of language learning. The two components, applied linguistics and theories of language learning, logically go together, because teaching approaches, methods and techniques have to match theories of learning if they are to be effective in the classroom. The Zimbabwean situation is not very different from most traditional language education departments, where it is assumed, rightly or wrongly, that student teachers come to the department already equipped with a knowledge of theoretical linguistics, such as grammar and other language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. The teacher educator sees his or her role simply as that of instructing the student teachers on how to apply their assumed knowledge to classroom teaching. This is normally done in the form of lectures and seminars on ESL teaching methods and L2 learning theories. This traditional approach to teacher education is what Freeman (1994, p. 15) refers to as the "front-loading" approach; an approach in which a student is given an "identity kit which teacher education programmes promote through lectures, group work, papers, reading articles and books and the like" (p.16).

The basic assumption of traditional ESL teacher education in Zimbabwe is that by exposing the student teacher to the approaches, methods and techniques of ESL teaching and to some ESL learning theories, the

student will emerge from the programme reasonably competent to conduct classes on his or her own. This theorising is interspersed with brief periods during which the student teacher is sent out on teaching practice, and teacher educators visit the student in the field to assess his or her teaching skills using a predesigned assessment tool, a check list for the "identity kit". Classroom practice is assumed to give immediate context to the three components of theoretical linguistics, language learning theories and applied linguistics. It is assumed that the student teacher will be able to call on his or her experience and knowledge learnt in college to negotiate through a lesson with a class.

Most research on the theory and practice of teaching has shown, however, that there are frequent inconsistencies between theory and practice wherever teacher education adopts the "front-loading" approach in which student teachers are seen as receptacles of prepackaged knowledge. This approach falls short because it does not take into account the student teacher's own version of the world of teaching and learning (Freeman, 1990). It is now generally believed that the knowledge a student teacher receives in a teachers' college does not to any large extent translate into practice (see, for example, Noll, 1993; Cole and Knowles, 1993; Kleinsasser, 1993; Rust, 1994). Results of these studies indicate that student teachers enter teacher education programmes with their own beliefs of the nature of teaching and learning, and traditional teacher education programmes are rarely able to dislodge these beliefs before the students leave college. The result is the perpetuation of the status quo; the teachers go on from college to teach in the way they themselves were taught. This points to the need for alternative approaches to teacher education programmes in Zimbabwe.

One recommended approach, as suggested in my preceding discussion, is to approach teacher education through the student's own world, guiding

him or her to interpret this world individually (see, for example, Fullan, 1992; Goodson, 1992). This kind of approach makes a student teacher an autonomous learner. If student teachers are not given the tools of autonomous learning, they will easily fall victim to uncreative, routine teaching dictated to them by the norms or contextual factors under which they find themselves working on a daily basis. This is one way the status quo is maintained in the classroom (Freeman, 1994). Following is a suggested teacher education programme, again using ESL as an example, that aims to break the impasse brought about by recycled routines of traditional teaching.

Towards an Effective ESL Teacher Education Programme

In this section I will discuss how the four components of subject content, theories of language learning, language teaching methodology and classroom practice ought to interact in order to make teaching effective in today's changing instructional contexts. It is important that the four components include among them a knowledge of how students learn a language. Theories of language learning cater for the learner for whom teaching is done. In naming the four components, I have used the words "ought to" because I am not sure that in Zimbabwe's ESL classroom situation today, all the four components are interacting to any effective extent.

In an ideal ESL teaching situation, the four components involved in teaching should work in synchronic harmony, each feeding into the other for theoretically sound ESL instruction and learning. In the traditional system of education, which Zimbabwe seems to follow, the process involves three groups of people. These are the theoretical scientist, the applied linguist and the classroom teacher. The theoretical scientist

provides teaching content to the applied linguist, who in turn tries it out as procedures for conveying the knowledge to the learner. Knowledge of how languages are learned guides this methodology. And, finally, all this knowledge from the two people is made available to the classroom teacher for implementation in classroom instruction. Thus, in this hierarchical model, it is the classroom teacher who is at the bottom, who acts as the final consumer of all the knowledge manufactured by the "experts" above him or her. This traditional synchronic harmony among the four components is illustrated in Figure 2 following.

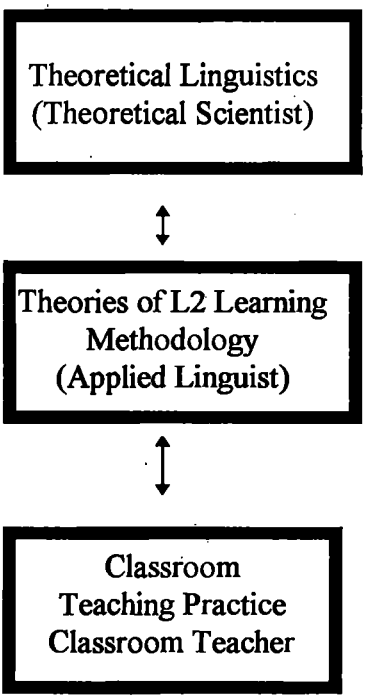

Figure 2: A model for the traditional development of language teaching practice

The problem with the top-down model in Figure 2 is that it is likely to be ineffective, because the teacher, a key player in the equation, is not part of the manufacturing of knowledge on how to teach. This point has been demonstrated in the past hundred years, during which "progressive educational ideas, by and large, have never really taken root in classrooms, not even in the teaching of English, the subject in which there has probably been the most radical theorizing over those hundred years" (Mayher, 1990: ix). In today's educational set-up, according to Mayher (1990), university professors of theoretical and applied linguistics prescribe their results to the classroom teacher, who often finds, however, that these theorists are out of touch with the real problems of classroom instruction:

For many professionals, including teachers, there has been a growing disenchantment with technically rational solutions for the real problems they face daily in the classroom, and a consequent growing scepticism that university theory and research, still largely dominated by technical rationality, will help them much (Mayher, 1990, p. 7).

The technical approach, or theoretical prescriptions referred to by Mayher (1990) are still very much a feature of ESL teacher education in Zimbabwe today, at least as I know it from my fifteen years of ESL teacher preparation in Zimbabwe. One negative result of this technical approach is that teachers dismiss all the theories equally and instead simply follow their noses and adopt a generally eclectic approach to teaching methods (Corder, 1979).

The assumption that theory will automatically transform itself into practice has since been proved wrong. More and more educationists are beginning to realize that one important factor is missing from the traditional ESL teacher education paradigm: the missing link which would balance the whole equation is the teacher. It is now being realised that, by virtue of

being in the front line, the teacher should be involved in all the research, planning and decision-making that affect classroom practice. A classroom teacher should be involved in all these activities because he or she is the one who meets on a daily basis the problems and successes of trying out all the prescriptions from those above. As I have already said, an involved teacher will not act like a technician, but like a professional who is able to rationalize his or her decisions and actions, as Yalden (1987: 4) says: "We may be very good in training teachers in the use of specific techniques, gadgets, in a cookbook approach to the classroom, but we have been very lax in developing a cadre of teachers who know why they do what they do". The teacher who knows why he or she is doing what he or she is doing is the one most likely to meet successfully the many new challenges of the twenty-first century ESL classroom. This is the kind of teacher who is going to bring about meaningful change in our present schools (see Fullan, 1992).

An alternative approach to traditional ESL teacher education, therefore, ought to break down the old, artificial barriers dividing the classroom teacher from the bases of knowledge manufacturing, educational planning and decision-making. This approach calls for the reversal of the top-down approach to the bottom-up approach, in what Mayher (1990: 9) calls an "ecological change". This means teacher education programmes that emphasize empowerment of the student teacher by giving him or her classroom-based research skills (Wallat, Green, Conlin and Haramis, 1981; Fullan, 1992). Equipped with these skills, the teacher will be able to explore independently the very basis of his or her own beliefs about teaching. The teacher will also be able to raise questions and explore how his or her students learn. These action research skills will form a sound basis for a teacher to start his or her own life-long journey of self-discovery in terms of what works well for his/her classroom. Such a teacher will be able to arrive at what constitutes good teaching by

integrating theory with his/her own personal knowledge, thereby narrowing the gap between theory and practice. Where teachers feel they might not be able to "go it alone" in research ventures, they will be able to join collaborative research teams that may include some university professors. The other alternative would be to create social forums or teaching centres through which teachers could share their views. The key idea would be to involve the classroom teacher as much as possible, with the idea that the implementation of research results would depend to a large extent on the classroom teacher.

Giving teachers simple research skills will enable them to evaluate critically any prescription from above that might come to them in the name of innovation. The research skills will make them discerning professionals who will not easily fall victim to new teaching fads and fashions. The fads and fashions are what Chomsky (1975) warns language teachers in particular to guard against, when he writes:

In general, the willingness to rely on "experts" is a frightening aspect of contemporary political and social life. Teachers, in particular, have a responsibility to make sure that ideas and proposals are evaluated on their merits, and not passively accepted on grounds of authority, real or presumed. The field of language teaching is no exception. It is possible - even likely, that principles of psychology and linguistics, and research in these disciplines, may supply insights useful to the language teacher. But this must be demonstrated, and cannot be presumed. It is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal. There is very little in psychology or linguistics that he can accept on faith" (p. 237).

My interpretation of Chomsky's words in the preceding quotation is that teachers should critically evaluate any ideas or proposals, political, social, cultural or other, before they attempt to introduce them into their teaching.

We need a new approach to teacher education that has the potential of producing teachers with the ability to do this. An example of such an approach to teacher education can be found in Schon (1983; 1987) and Goodson (1992), whose main concern is reflective teaching. Richards and Lockhart (1994) discuss the reflective approach to teaching as it applies to second language classrooms. Using the reflective approach to teacher education, Goodson (1992) discusses how change can be effected in teachers.

In short, reflective teaching is a reflection in action which combines personal knowledge and doing, technical knowledge and artistry (Schon, 1983; 1987). This is an approach to teacher preparation that involves "comparing our knowing with our doing, our beliefs with our practices, and exploring, with artistry, the connections among them" (Mayher, 1990: 9). Over time, teachers develop their own perceptions about how classroom activity leads to desired learning outcomes, and this is usually through the process of reflective teaching, learning through natural rather than enforced experimentation and reflection (Abelson, 1979).

If we, teacher educators, approach ESL teacher education programmes by first examining and questioning beliefs student teachers bring to teachers' colleges, we may be able to influence them to practise their teaching based on sound theory. To produce knowledgeable, adaptable and committed teachers, we need to begin by understanding their long-held beliefs about teaching. If we, as teacher educators, can educate our teachers to question the bases of their beliefs, we are more likely to bring into our classrooms teachers who are reflective and adaptable to the ever-changing teaching and learning environments promised by the twenty-first century.

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